

CANADIAN MINING COMPANY PREACHES DEVELOPMENT, REAPS DIVISION IN ECUADOR (8/22/05)



Written by Stuart Schussler

Junín, a small town in the mountainous Intag region of northwestern Ecuador, is home for about 500 Ecuadorians. The community is rich in many ways for local residents. Fertile land produces organic coffee, sugar cane, and oranges for export. The town is located next to the Cotacachi-Cayapas Ecological Reserve and the people of Junín created their own community ecological reserve 8 years ago. These protected areas cover a large expanse of cloud forest and protect one of the world's most biologically diverse ecosystems.

The social fabric is also rich. Public works projects like road maintenance or repairs on the school house are done with the traditional minga system, where members from each family volunteer to do a couple days of work for the common good.

However, in the eyes of Ascendant Copper Corporation, a Canadian mining company, Junín's wealth isn't in its people or its diverse ecosystem—it's in its rocks.

Junín's community reserve contains an estimated 2.26 million tons of copper. But this isn't a recent discovery. Bishimetals, a subsidiary of the Japanese-based Mitsubishi Corporation, tried in the mid-1990s to mine the area. The company even got as far as building a provisional mining camp. But local community members learned of the estimated environmental and social impacts of the proposed open pit mine, which included potential cyanide contamination of the local water supply, increase in crime, and the forced relocation of the area's residents.

The community organized and educated each other in order to protect their community and their health. They tried to contact Bishimetals and express their lack of support for the project. But after being ignored repeatedly in their requests, the people of Junín burned down the provisional mining camp in May of 1997. The company got the message and left.

Today Ascendant Copper is trying to lay the groundwork for a mine and do what Bishimetals couldn't. Community support and preliminary exploration are needed before mining can occur. To win this support, Ascendant says they are "developing a strategic development plan for the communities in the area." They see Junín and its neighboring communities as poor, backwards areas whose only hope for salvation lies in the charity of foreign investors.

Olga Cultid disagrees.

"They say we're in extreme poverty," said Olga, as she sat in Junin's ecotourism cabañas. "But it's a lie. I'm not rich, but I'm not lacking either."

One of the company's "development strategies" has been to buy people off—giving them jobs and handouts if they support the mine. Olga, whose son goes to school in the neighboring community of Garcia Moreno, was offered a bribe in exchange for her support of the mine.

"They offered to pay for transportation, lodging, everything for my son. They offered me a job as protector of the environment," she said.

But she refused. In her eyes it is more important that the community own its land and remain contamination-free for future generations. Those who support mining "don't think about our children," she says.

Ascendant's proposed mine, and the company's unscrupulous actions to gain "support" for it has been a very divisive force in the community, more so than any other local development project.

While Junín is steadfast in its opposition, Garcia Moreno (a neighboring town) by-and-large supports mining. Since Ascendant began working in the area, the relationship between the two communities has progressively worsened.

"We used to be like one big family, but now everything has changed," said Olga. "Now you can't go and have friendly conversation. It's not the same."

Yet, the tensions have grown more hostile than just cold receptions. On April 11 a mob of unruly pro-miners led by Ascendant's general manager stormed into the municipality's meeting hall, breaking windows and demanding an audience with the mayor.

Auki Tituaña, the mayor of Cotacachi County where Junín and Ascendant's mining concession lie, has come out publicly against the project. He said that Ascendant "is implementing policies designed to divide communities, through questionable promises [housing, roads, jobs, bridges, classrooms, etc.] intended to break the spirit of the courageous residents of Intag."

He also promised to "exhaust all avenues, regardless of the consequences, in the defense of our rights, which take precedence over the private interests of others [whose activities would lead] to the destruction of our natural wealth."

Residents of Garcia Moreno, who support such private interests, have also threatened to forcefully occupy Junín's community ecological reserve so that the company can do preliminary exploration and testing. Many anti-mining activists have also received death threats.

In addition, Ascendant hired Cesar Villacís Rueda, a former army general with deep ties to Ecuador's military intelligence who also studied at the School of the Americas. The ex-general, who travels with an intimidating entourage of armed bodyguards, is handling "public relations" for the company.

While advocating development, Ascendant Copper's actions have left painful divisions between communities, friends, and even families. This is a far cry from the company's most esteemed corporate value: to "maintain the human factor as the most important issue in the development of any mining project."

Examples of divisive and destructive mining projects by transnational companies can be found all over Latin America. Unfortunately, more can be expected. Due to all the metal needed to support China's rapid industrial expansion, in addition to the ravenous consumption needs of the United States and Europe, the value of resources such as copper has gone through the roof. As the history of mining in Latin America suggests, companies like Ascendant will stop at nothing to capitalize on such an opportunity, even if it means tearing apart communities, contaminating the environment with poisonous chemicals and violating human rights.

But the presence of various mining companies hasn't been completely negative. It has spurred an organized and motivated resistance to mining, which is committed to finding alternative

and sustainable economic development models for the area.

"If these companies had not come to take away our peace and tranquility, we'd never have organized ourselves," said Rosario Piedra.

Piedra helps administer the community eco-tourism project created to provide a sustainable and equitable alternative to mining. The eco-tourism program has been successful and benefits the entire community. Many people are involved with the regional ecological organization Defense and Conservation of Intag (DECOIN). DECOIN has been very active in its resistance to this unpopular and possibly illegal mining project and has been successful in fostering some international awareness and support. A program of international human rights observers has also been created to document events when things get hostile.

While Ascendant Copper benefits from a divide-and-conquer strategy, most in Junín understand that community is the real wealth in life. Or as Rosario said, "my friendships come first, so I'll never sell out."

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